CHAPTER 5

Sam(p)son’s Advent: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of Judges 13 in Hebrew and Greek

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years a revolution has taken place in the field of biblical studies, a revolution which has proven to be of immense benefit in understanding biblical texts in their original languages. This revolution has come about in the application of modern linguistics to the languages and texts of biblical literature, and it has led to great advances in our understanding of everything from Greek syntax to Hebrew orthography to Aramaic word order.¹

At first glance this is a bit like saying there has been a revolution in carpentry with the introduction of electric power tools, a statement so broad as to be uninteresting. But reflect for a moment on what this means. A woodworking tool as commonplace as a router did not exist prior to World War I; yet this simple tool has revolutionized cabinetry and empowered ‘do-it-yourselfers’ the world over. Likewise the category of discourse analysis, an approach forged in modern linguistics, has the potential to do great things for biblical scholars, providing them with a power tool for exegesis, criticism, translation, and interpretation. But what exactly is discourse analysis, and how has it been applied in biblical studies? Are there other avenues of research for which it may prove useful? After surveying these questions I will argue that a tagmemic model of discourse analysis provides an ideal yet little explored approach to understanding the relationship between texts in the Hebrew Bible and their Old Greek translation(s). I will then demonstrate this potential by developing and applying a method of comparative discourse analysis to the birth narrative of Samson (Judges 13).

Discourse Analysis

General Description
The majority of linguistic schools are concerned with analysis at or below the level of the sentence; so much so, in fact, as to limit the domain of linguistic investigation to isolated sentences. The statement of John Lyons is typical: “The sentence is the largest unit of grammatical description. A sentence is a grammatical unit between the constituent parts of which distributional limitations and dependencies can be established, but which can itself be put into no distributional class.” Schools of discourse analysis, on the other hand, concern themselves with texts or discourses, that is, coherent combinations of sentences. These approaches (and indeed their name is Legion) all have in common an assumption that linguistic data and structures requiring and inviting description exist above the level of the clause or sentence. Not only are there linguistic phenomena beyond the sentence interesting in their own right, but they also have been shown to directly impact lower-level linguistic phenomena, from pronouns to phonology. Linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) noticed this in their fieldwork, and the work of European scholars confirms this. De Beaugrande and Dressler summarize the beginnings of textlinguistics thus:

Karl-Erich Heidolph (1966) notes that the factors of accent, intonation, and word-order within a sentence depend on the organization of other sentences in the vicinity. He suggested that a feature of “mentioned” vs. “not mentioned” could be inserted into the grammar to regulate these factors. Horst Isenberg (1968, 1971) follows Heidolph with a further enumeration of factors which cannot be solved within the bounds of the isolated sentence, such as pronouns, articles, and sequences of tenses.